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ABSTRACT

Fifteen married couples, who, by their definitions, share parenting responsibilities, were interviewed. The most frequently cited reason for this practice was that the wife was dissatisfied with the limiting role of homemaker and wanted to be outside the home and away from the children part of the time, in order to pursue a career or add variety to her life. With the wife's role expanded into the community, husbands took up more of the child-rearing burden and much of the housework. The couples noted the benefits and problems of such an alternative parenting system, and offered throughts on how society could change to accommodate such patterns. Thoughts on how professionals in health and behavioral sciences can be of service to couples interested in beginning or maintaining such a child-rearing style are presented. (Author)

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NEW MEANING FOR PARENTHOOD

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NEW MEANING FOR PARENTHOOD

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Introduction

Fred Davis* is a normal enough guy. He grew up on a small family farm in Illinois, and was a member of the local 4-H Club. After graduation from the University of Illinois with a degree in agriculture, he taught high school, served with the Peace Corps in Cyprus and Washington, D.C., married, picked up a Master's degree at the University of California--Davis, and worked in agricultural development under the Rockefeller Foundation in Mexico.

Now he's finishing up a Ph.D. in development studies in the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture. His story is not particularly unique, especially in Madison. Agricultural activity, travel, and education are relatively common occurrences for residents of this Midwestern university city of 200,000, nestled in the heart of "America's Dairyland."

But one curious thing about Fred: his two-year-old daughter, Amy, calls him "Mommy."

Sally Davis grew up in suburban Chicago. She graduated from tiny Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, served with the Peace Corps in Liberia and Washington, D.C. (where she met Fred), got a Master's degree in political science at Davis, and cared for young son Jack while in Mexico.

Now her vocation is as a half-time editor for a state mental health agency house organ; her avocation is in feminist politics--counseling, leading discussion groups, pushing for legislation on various issues.

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*All names in this paper are fictional.

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And, make no mores about it, daughter Amy calls Sally "Mommy," too.

The Davises explain that "Mommy," in Amy's language, is the name for the parent who takes care of her. Since Fred and Sally equally share the responsibility and work of caring for their two children, both have been accorded the honor of the title, "Mommy."

Tradition, and, possibly necessity in industrial America dictated a strict segregation of role responsibilities for parents. Mothers took care of children, and fathers were breadwinners. Many men are quite happy with this type of relationship:

> A sample of tycoons, for example, did admit... that they preferred to spend their time on their job than to spend it with their families. And B.F. Skinner... said on a television program that he had told his daughters that if he had to choose between saving his work and saving them, he would save his work. No hard feelings, he assured them, just a matter of priorities (Bernard, 1972, p. 204).

There is evidence, however, that traditional fatherhood is much more satisfying than traditional motherhood. Countless articles and personal testimonies from the voices of what has come to be called the Feminist Movement bear witness to the contention that "to live for one's children"--essentially what is demanded of many mothers--is too heavy a burden.

This paper is an initial report of a continuing investigation of non-traditional nuclear family child-rearing patterns. It will be argued that parents who more equally share "the joys and sorrows of parenthood" are practicing a viable, healthy, and satisfying alternative to traditional nuclear family child-rearing practices.

> an-dro-gy-ny, n. from the Greek roots, andr- and gynos, meaning "male" and "female"; a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes--and the human impulses expressed by men and women--are not rigidly assigned (Rosenstein, 1973, p. 3).

An Androgyne, then, is "a creature for whom... anatomy is not destiny; for whom the capacities to respond and make and be are irrelevant

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of gender (Rosenstein, 1973, p. 38)." There has been discussion of androgyny as a life style (Osofsky & Osofsky, 1972); a society without sex role differentiation is seen as an option for many individuals in the near future.

The Study

I interviewed fifteen couples recently who to greater or lesser degree, self-consciously or unconsciously, are moving in the direction of androgyny. In all cases, both members of the couple have active lives outside the home, and, also, are vital participants inside the home. These couples segregate few aspects of their lives, if any, on the basis of sex. "So nothing is done in your family strictly because of one's sex," I said to one couple. "Right," the husband, an accomplished gourmet cook replied. Not even sex: "Even in sex we flop around. I'm not on top all the time!"

When the study was begun six months ago, it was not known how difficult or easy it would be to find subjects. The criterion: couples, who, by their own definition, are sharing child-rearing. Surprisingly, such androgynous parents are relatively easy to find in Madison, and, by word-of-mouth, in a few weeks 100 parents were found. This number proved to be more than enough. Since the interview designed for the study takes between two-and-a-half and four hours to administer, I soon had 45 hours of cassette tapes to analyze.

The interview is an effort to find out how people share parenting, why, the problems they encounter, the benefits they realize, how society needs to change in order to better accommodate persons who share or wish to share parenting responsibilities, and what professionals in behavioral sciences can do to help.

The Results: People Who Share Parenting

Since education is a major industry in Madison, one would expect to find

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many people in any sample population to be connected with the University of Wisconsin or the city's two smaller colleges. This sample was gathered simply by asking people if they knew anyone who shared parenting responsibilities. The first person contacted happened to be in the university community and gave the names of a handful of couples, who also were in the university community. Now a case can be made that university people never associate with persons outside of academia, and that is why the search found so few who were not connected in some way with higher education. But it is hard to imagine such insularity being the only contributing factor to such a strangely skewed sample: 20 out of 30 parents interviewed were either students, faculty, or staff of one of Madison's higher educational institutions. The formal educational level was extremely high: 14 doctorates or doctoral candidates (2 of the 14 are women); 8 post-graduate degree holders (7 of 8 are women); 5 bachelor's degree holders (3 out of 5 are women); and 3 high-school graduates, all women working on a college degree. Only two families had neither parent connected with the university or a college. And, of the total sample of 120 persons, nearly 90% were from families with a member associated with academia.

And so, it is reasonable to argue that university people do not speak with those outside the institution; but, it also is reasonable that there is something intrinsic to university life that makes sharing parenting responsibilities less difficult. That something, which came up time after time in the interviews, is flexibility. Though all the people in the sample put in long hours--at least 40 hours per week, and in most cases 55 to 60--in general, the more flexible the work schedule of both parents, the more sharing occurred.

All 30 parents described themselves as liberal to radical in political philosophy on a spectrum ranging from conservative to revolutionary. And, interestingly enough, though the couples are [illegible] child-rearing practices

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that many might consider to have revolutionary implications for society, hardly any of the parents were "politically active." Only one woman considers herself an active member of the Feminist Movement. Two other women had attended an occasional women's rap group. Most parents, however, saw themselves as relatively apolitical--interested but not involved. An occasional Ms. Magazine on a coffee table was the greatest connection with politics most of the women have. One woman leads a group of Brownie Scouts; another is a foster parent with her husband. There is also a member of the Audobon Society, and a woman formerly active in the League of Women Voters. Generally, these parents are too busy in home and job responsibilities to do much else.

The Results: What They Do

Though the study focuses on androgynous child-rearing patterns, data on household labor and occupational labor was also gathered to gain some notion of how completely sex roles had been altered from the traditional patterns. The parents, seated together in their homes, were asked not only about various parenting tasks and the percentage of the chore during the week each took, but also about the percentage of the time the father did housework, and the percentage of the time the mother worked outside the home. For example, a couple would be asked to estimate the percentage each did of the total dishwashing; a mock-heated and good-humored debate on each category invariably would ensue as to who worked the hardest, and how much harder.

It was found that the husbands in these fifteen families did 30% of the total care of the children in three cases, and 40% to 50% of the child care in the other twelve cases. (Child care task categories estimated during the interview by the couple included: putting the children to bed, caring for them when they are ill, brushing teeth, combing hair, bathing, taking them

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to school and other places, playing, teaching, and disciplining them.)

In three of the families the husbands did between 20% and 35% of the total housework. The other twelve husbands did between 40% and 50% of the housework. (Household tasks estimated in the interview included cooking, dishwashing, cleaning, servicing the car, paying bills, grocery and other shopping, laundering, letter writing, ironing, taking out the garbage, repairing household items, lawn and garden work, and exterior maintenance of the residence.)

In one family the mother did not work outside the home, but had other interests outside of homemaking; in four families the mothers did between 20% and 33% of this total occupational labor; in six families the mothers did between 40% and 45% of the total occupational labor; and, in four families the mothers did between 50% and 60% of the work outside the home.

Though the lives of these parents are complex and fragmented, a relatively easy-going, almost ho-hum attitude pervades most. Scheduling problems are great in families with both parents working outside the home; and, as the number of children and their ages increase, these difficulties are compounded. But only three couples had a written schedule for their labors--the general attitude being that such formalities "cramp our style," or are "unrealistic and unworkable." Two women, noting there was no schedule in their household, added it might be helpful until the husband learned all of his responsibilities to have them written down.

Only one couple had a formal contract, and it was my great pleasure to act as arbitrator in a conference when the two renegotiated the terms of the agreement. It seems that after six months on the present contract, schedules and workloads had changed considerably, and alterations had to be made. So, the husband, a physicist, the wife, a senior law student in labor relations, and I sat down one evening at the bargaining table. About fifty work categories

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were listed; then, the debate began:

> Husband: Now, wait a minute! Cleaning up the dishes after meals is worth at least forty-five minutes each night.
>
> Wife: Oh, baloney! It takes me no more than fifteen minutes and you know it.
>
> Husband: I know, but you cheated on cleaning. It doesn't take you that long. You padded it. Now I'll tell you what I'll do...

And so it continued, padding and repadding until each had more hours of work listed on the schedule than he or she had hours in the week. After one and a half rollicking but earnest hours the tasks were divided, and the husband to my surprise pulled out a handy pocket computer. He totalled the work up and announced proudly that he had four more hours of work than his wife, and she would have the horor of picking two hours more from his list. Another thirty minutes of bargaining ensued until the contract was finally agreed upon, signed, witnessed, and sealed with a handshake.

The Results: Why They Share

Fourteen of the fifteen couples, when asked for the major reason they share parenting, responded, in essence: the wife was dissatisfied with the limiting role of homemaker, and wanted to be outside of the home and away from the children part of the time, in order to pursue a career or add variety to her life. For five couples this was the only reason they gave for sharing. A few relevant quotes follow:

> Wife: My needs to do some things for myself put some stress on the system in our home. I was very depressed. I couldn't depend on my husband to be my whole life outside the home. He would walk in the door and I'd expect him to give me the whole rundown. He would have to be the U.S. News and World Report. But this didn't work for either of us. I couldn't live vicariously.
>
> Wife: I wanted to go to law school, and I refused to do all the work.
> Husband: Yeah, I'd just as soon she did all the work around

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the house and take care of the kids. I'd like to have a slave.
Wife: From the day we were married I was miserable being a housewife.
Husband: She was a terrible housewife.

Wife: I had growing hostility toward my husband and my life. I harangued. I blamed him. He encouraged me to go back to school.

Wife: We had to share. There was no other way if I was to do the things I want to do.

Husband: Well, I think it's because we share most of the things we do.
Wife: It's because I didn't want to get stuck raising a kid! That's all. I don't want to be stuck at home raising a child. That's not my idea of what my future was about. I didn't want to have children unless it could be a shared kind of thing.
Husband: Yeah.

Wife: Neither of us wants to do it all. It's fairer this way.

Husband: Survival of the marriage. You can't keep 'em down on the farm.
Wife: Personal fulfillment.

Wife: It's extremely frustrating to stay home.

Husband: You do it for self-preservation.

Wife: To get away from home. He understands what it's like to have Alex all day.
Husband: Oh, God, yes!

One couple did not list the wife's escape from total immersion in the home as the major reason for sharing. They explained that the first three of their five children were born within fourteen months of each other. The mother needed help with the children, and the husband's university position "made it possible" for him to be very actively involved.

Other secondary reasons for sharing mentioned during the interviews were: the wife felt it would be beneficial to the children if the husband were involved with them more (three times); the husband felt it would be beneficial to the children if he were more involved with them (once); and the husband felt it would be beneficial to him if he were more involved

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with the children (three times).

The Results: Problems

The couples were asked what factors made it difficult to share child-rearing. The key to this whole issue appears to be jobs. If the parents have flexible work hours, such as those of a university professor or student, they "can afford the luxury of shared parenting," as one said. A major question yet to be answered then is: do people share because their job schedules are flexible? or do they share parenting because something about their personalities makes them want to do this, and they seek jobs that make sharing possible? This attitudes vs. economics question may be somewhat of a chicken-and-egg problem. But it can be attacked from at least two angles: by asking parents who don't share child-rearing responsibilities whether they would like to share but simply can't because of inflexible job schedules; and, by trying to find personality differences between parents who do share and parents who don't share. Both approaches will be used in a follow-up study, for there is evidence that both personality and work situation are contributing factors.

Couples who completely share child-rearing in order for the wife to pursue a career or go to school are confronted by the problem of three full-time jobs with only two adults to perform them. Child-care and housekeeping are one full-time job, and two occupations outside the home bring the total to three.

Adequate professional child-care, then, can be a great help to these couples; lack of it can be a burden, and this is the couples' second most difficult problem. All eight couples with children in nursery schools or day care centers expressed general satisfaction with the care the children received. The search for adequate professional child-care for their young

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children proved to be difficult in several cases, but successful in all. Madison, however, may be unique in that there are several well-equipped and competently-staffed early childhood education centers. But these centers cost the parents money. Given adequate care for their children, the parents suffer little guilt in sending the young off to "strangers" five days a week. One woman argued, "the kids are happier now than they were being cooped up alone with me all day."

Though there was unanimous satisfaction with child care for preschool-aged children, dismay with the public school system was voiced (by five of the twelve couples with school-aged children). "The schools operate on the assumption that in a normal family a woman will be home all day to make lunches for children, be free to help in the classroom, bake cookies for P.T.A.," one mother said. A number of examples of alleged sexist attitudes of school faculty and staff were brought up, also.

Personality and attitudinal problems within the home contribute to these parents' difficulties. Husbands are sometimes thought to be somewhat lacking in skill in child-rearing and housekeeping. A few mothers expressed guilt that they may be causing their husbands some difficulty by asking for more help. "At first, I tried to make my new career not change his life," one woman said, explaining that she tried to single-handedly go to school, care for the children, and keep house. "But, it was too much. I couldn't." And, a few husbands expressed some concern that new responsibilities at home made them somewhat guilty that they were not working hard enough on their careers. "But, I guess I've felt I could work harder," one father said.

Generally, the mother experiences a somewhat extended period of discomfort and dissatisfaction with her life before the change is made. This lasts between one and three years. When she finally realizes she wants to have some time outside the home, the husbands are unanimously supportive of this move. In

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several cases, in fact, the husbands saw the solution to the problem before the wives, and literally pushed the women from the home.

After these internal struggles are resolved and the wife is seeking a new direction, the greatest problems the couple are confronted by are not personal ones inside the family--such as differing views on child-rearing and housekeeping. Instead, social/economic factors outside the family--predominately jobs and child-care--make shared parenting difficult.

The Results: Benefits

> Husband: It's never going to happen that I come home, sit down and read the paper, get up and eat, sit back down and read the paper, and go up and say good night to the kids. It's just never going to happen. That's just inconceivable.

In evaluating marital satisfaction of the parents before and after the changes in role responsibilities were made, all parents were positive.

Women, now stimulated by outside interests, were especially enthusiastic. "I now feel neither boredom nor depression," one woman said, who, incidently, is beginning a thesis on depression at the University of Wisconsin. Maternal relations with children were judged to be much stronger or stronger in all cases but two (in which they were estimated to be of about the same strength).

Two men noted that the costs to them in time were not trivial, and that housework was not "overwhelmingly exciting." Another man noted pleasure, however, in his new independence: "It made me feel really great when she went to Europe for two weeks and I could take complete care of the children." All in all, the benefits greatly outweigh the costs. All thirty parents reported better relations with their partners. All men noted stronger relationships with the children. And one man said his sex life was more satisfying (presumably with his wife).

"I have struck a saner balance in my life," one father said, explaining

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that a demanding job once had him feeling "like a boarder" in his own home. With increased freedom in his new position at the university, "we began to build back the connections."

"It's almost as if formerly I were a guest, and now I really live here," another father said.

One couple noted they had more in common to talk about now. Another, that their relationship is "more intimate, more meaningful."

Perhaps the most dramatic story is that of the husband who had been an extremely successful student in a high-powered university, entered academia at Wisconsin and quickly rose in the ranks to become a full professor at a young age. As his successful career spiralled upward, his wife's satisfaction with life plummeted with each year she lived totally for her family. Then, he said:

> I have a brother who had kidney failure two years ago. His condition is deteriorating. He's on dialysis and doing okay on that, but he's got bone problems, and so on. And, we've had some deaths in the neighborhood, and I've just gotten a slightly different sort of appreciation for life.
>
> I can get more into the kids because of that. Less concern for the professional thing. Thinking a little bit more about death and life, and what one can enjoy while one is here.

Confronted with these crises, he re-evaluated the priorities of his life, and turned them around. The family became first, to his wife's benefit, and, as it turned out, to his.

The Results: What Needs to be Done

If more parents are to have the freedom to choose such an apparently successful child-rearing style, many changes are necessary in our society. "I can't think of one single institution which helps make our way easier," one father said, arguing that society is designed to trap women in the home and trap men on the job.

The vast majority of jobs are designed to fit the needs of the

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the industrial system, and not the needs of families. There must be many more part-time jobs for people, with equitable pay. It was argued that part-time workers probably are much more efficient than full-time workers: "Hour-for-hour," a part-timer declared, "my boss gets much more out of me."

"Careerism," then, the notion that one's job is more important than one's family, is overwhelmingly the greatest barrier to a satisfying life, according to these parents.

Adequate and reasonably-priced child-care was also cited by the couples as essential.

The Results: Can the "Helping Professions" Help?

Finally, the parents were asked if members of the so-called "helping professions" can be of support to couples interested in trying or maintaining a new parenting style.

More than half of the couples had at least one member of the helping professions in it. Interestingly enough, the professionals felt more negative about the effects of their work than the non-professionals. Three-fourths of the professionals offered spontaneous criticism, compared to only one-fourth of the non-professionals in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, social work, child development and family relations, medicine, education and related areas. Criticism focuses upon the notion that many in these professions are insensitive to the needs of non-traditional families. The professionals, however, could effect many changes in counseling situations by making couples aware of the alternatives to traditional child-rearing and role patterns that exist. These alternatives can also be mentioned in educational settings. More research is needed on this and related subjects, many parents said. And, one mother argued that "most of the books written on child-rearing assume that only

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mothers rear children."

The helping professions focus their efforts on individuals. It is apparent, however, that the greatest obstacles to those who wish to share parenting responsibilities come from the macro-society. Cognizant of this, professionals within each individual discipline can work to expand the freedom of parents who seek new approaches to child-rearing.

> I had been a big success in my career line, and I could re-evaluate, 'Well, do I want just more and more and more of this, or what do I want out of life?' And, I decided I really didn't need to keep playing the game of prestige and fame, and that there are really a lot of other things that are more important.

Like having a happy and fulfilled wife, and knowing how to relate to one's kids, as this father went on to explain.

But dramatic changes in one's way of life come hard, and those in the helping professions will be as resistant to change as anyone else. Time and again the mind conjures the image of the dogged male physician, psychologist, teacher, social worker, putting in impossibly long hours to help those in need, while his wife struggles alone at home to raise children that have become virtual strangers to him. The irony of this picture strikes deep. Charity, it seems, does not begin at home.

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